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ABSTRACT

Drawing on recent research on sexism in English and the ways in which social forces affect language structure, this paper shows how prescriptive statements about English have been incorporated into linguistic grammars as descriptions of language. It is claimed that Chomsky's "universal grammar" is masculinist and that it is contradicted by native speaker usage of English. The five following assumptions of transformational theorists are falsified by evidence from English usage: (1) the pseudo-distinction between "grammatical" and "natural" gender; (2) the descriptive usefulness of binary features in syntactic/semantic analysis; (3) the concept of coreferentiality as a formal condition; (4) the process of pronominal replacement of an antecedent noun; and (5) the idea of linguistic universals, formal and substantive. The problems inherent in the generally accepted distinction between "natural" and "grammatical" gender are examined in order to indicate the problems in the four other areas. Historically, the name given to an object by male grammarians has been confused with the reality of the thing, and acceptance of sex-linked labels has necessitated the pseudo-distinction between "natural" and "grammatical" gender. Besides contributing to the present crisis in descriptive linguistics, masculinist bias has ignored descriptions of verb systems and the relationship between language structure and the culture in which a language is spoken. (AMH)

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Chomsky's 'Ideal' Native Speaker: Sexism in Synchronic Linguistics*

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DIALOGUE: ARGUMENTATION IN LINGUISTICS

Meander (a linguist) : I have a theory that everybody's eyes are colourless.

Simplon (a psychologist) : But, Meander, everybody's eyes look brown, blue, or green to me.

Meander: That's because they are actually wearing contact lenses to color their eyes.

Simplon: But, Meander, I know that I don't wear contact lenses, and when I look in the mirror my eyes look blue to me.

Meander: Ah: but then, there's a lot we don't know about mirrors.

(Bever, 1974: 173)

There are many morals for linguists that could be drawn from Bever's parable, some of them obvious and some of them not-so-obvious. One of the obvious messages in the dialogue points to the contemporary crisis in linguistics. Many linguists, in particular many who are prominent in the field, have chosen to work within a theoretical framework that posits, and seeks to define, linguistic universals. There is nothing inherently "wrong" with trying to establish the existence of linguistic universals. What creates problems within a model of language based on the idea that there are linguistic universals is the subject of yet another message to be gleaned from the exchange between Meander and Simplon. Simply put, a theory of linguistic universals tends not only to ignore individual uses of language, but to deny that such usage is relevant to the interests of the model. Furthermore, as Meander's last statement suggests, when confronted with either data or information that contradict(s) or refute(s) some specific theoretical formulation, linguists may tend to dismiss such evidence in order to maintain the theory at any cost. It is the thesis of this paper that the persistent refusal to admit the data of language use as a relevant to the construction of models of language is destructive to the enterprise of linguistic science, because that denial forces us to rely on judgments that originate in the mind of the linguist. If, as Meander says, "there's a lot we don't know about mirrors," we know even less about the mirrors in the linguist's mind. We should, therefore, be wary of our own statements about language, especially when we believe we're talking about

linguistic "universals." It might be useful, perhaps even healthy, to remind ourselves that most of us still carry around a lot of unfounded assumptions about language that we learned in our school grammars, and, as is the case with unexamined assumptions, we are usually blissfully unaware of when they are influencing our statements about language and determining (or distorting) what we observe "in" language. Ultimately, linguists will have to incorporate a method of reducing the influence of observer bias into our methodology, probably as part of a more general theory of performance.

It is not, however, the purpose of this paper to provide either a comprehensive critique of the state of linguistics or to suggest a methodologically-sound way of guarding against observer bias. My task at this point is more modest. Drawing on recent research on sexism in English and the ways in which social forces affect language structure, I will show how prescriptive statements about English have been incorporated into linguistic grammars as "descriptions" of language. More insidiously, judgments based on prescriptive assumptions have been put forth as "linguistic universals."

Prescriptive grammars of English were written by men, for men, about the language of men (Stanley: 1978). Chomsky's "universal grammar" represents yet one more masculinist grammar masquerading as a scientific description of Language. Chomsky's "ideal native speaker" in a "homogeneous speech community" is a white, middle-class, male heterosexual. All of the massive counter-evidence to his theory produced by research in sociolinguistics, dialectology, psycholinguistics, and stylistics is simply ignored. By ruling out evidence drawn from studies of language use, Chomsky has constructed a theory of language universals that reflects only male intuitions, (his, in particular). The languages of wimmin, of Blacks, of social and regional dialects have been categorized as "performance" and dismissed as irrelevant to the "larger" enterprise of discovering "linguistic universals."

My assertion regarding the masculinist bias in linguistic theory is borne out by the evidence amassed by those doing the research on the ways in which the structure of English has been affected by the attitudes of speakers of language and the grammarians who have "described" the language. The remainder of this paper will demonstrate that native speaker usage of English contradicts Chomsky's "formal" description because he took, as his starting point, the assumptions of prescriptive grammarians. Using only a few examples of contemporary English usage, I will explain how the five following assumptions of transformational theorists are empirically falsified by the evidence: (1) the pseudo-distinction between "grammatical" and "natural" gender; (2) the descriptive usefulness of binary features in syntactic/semantic analysis; (3) the concept of coreferentiality as a formal condition; (4) the process of pronominal replacement of an antecedent noun; (5) the idea of linguistic universals, formal and substantive. (Other areas of linguistic inquiry excluded because of space limitations include specific problems with diachronic descriptions of English, the confusion of semantics with meaning, and the equation of semantic processes with cognitive processes.) All of the five linguistic postulates I will discuss are interrelated; that is, each of the problematic assumptions relies upon the validity of the one that precedes it. Once the truth of the situation is fully grasped, it becomes clear how firmly Chomsky's ideas of "competence" are grounded in prescriptive assumptions about language which, in their turn, are based on the assumption of male superiority, and it becomes possible to understand why linguistic theory has foundered on the confrontation between its abstract "rules" and actual uses of language.

In order to understand the problems with binary features, coreferentiality, pronominalization, and universals, we must first see the problems inherent in the generally-accepted distinction between "natural" and "grammatical" gender.

> Gender plays a relatively minor part in the grammar of English. . . . There is no gender-concord; and the reference of the pronouns he, she, and it is very largely determined by what is sometimes referred to as 'natural' gender--for English, this depends upon the classification of persons and objects as male, female, or inanimate.
>
> (Lyons, 1969:283-4)

The only purpose for making a distinction between "natural" and "grammatical" gender is to provide a means of accounting for various types of concord, or agreement, in the languages we are describing. In Old English, for example, there was a complex system of agreement among the articles, adjectives, pronouns and the nouns to which they were grammatically related, and the system depended upon the classification of the noun. Such agreement processes are called "grammatical" gender. Although there are serious problems with "grammatical" gender, I won't discuss them here. (For a thorough treatment of those problems, see Robbins, 1978.) My concern is with the widely-held belief that English has an agreement system based on "natural" gender, a system in which pronominal replacement is determined by the agreement of a pronoun with its antecedent noun on the basis of biological sex. That is, while it can be accurately said that English uses sex as a basis for pronoun agreement with noun antecedents just in those cases in which speakers know the sex of the person to whom they are referring, the various traditional formulae requiring use of the masculine pronoun he as the pronominal replacement for those human nouns that do not refer to a specific individual make a lie of the assertion that English has anything approximating "natural" gender concord. As soon as speakers of English begin to use a singular noun, such as teacher, child, driver, poet, linguist, or speaker, we find a wide variety of usage which, for the most part, is undoubtedly unconscious and for that reason fascinating in its implications. The following examples will provide some idea of the realities of "gender concord" in English.

(6) The teacher knows that when she punishes a child he is likely to feel that her punishment represents a personal rejection of him.

(7) [Explicitness] is--or should be--part of the 'state of mind' of a linguist when he approaches his subject.

(8) A writer may be a man who has labored to make himself unemployable and who must, therefore, take what comfort he can in his own decision.

(9) This spider always carries her own supply of air about with her.

(10) Our America is singing!
In her schools and colleges,
on her streets and in her camps,
. . . .

(11) Simultaneously, the world's power requirements are outstripping her capacity; . . . .

It is not my purpose here to discuss each of these examples and their implications in detail. (For such a discussion, see Stanley, 1975, and 1977). What these examples should indicate to any serious student of language, English in particular, is that any attempt to describe English as a language with "natural gender" is going to be grossly inadequate. Such usage indicates that all contemporary accounts of pronominal agreement are inaccurate, and even those linguists who have acknowledged this strangeness in the "gender system" of English have failed to provide a satisfactory account of native speaker usage. Walter E. Meyers (1974), for example, perhaps the most astute grammarian at this time, has made the following observation:

> For human nouns, masculine appears to be the general feature, feminine the special one: that is, unless a human noun is specifically marked feminine, the noun phrase of which it is the head noun is replaced by he, his, or him.
>
> (p. 113)

If one accepts as a given that the masculine pronoun he is, indeed, the appropriate replacement for an antecedent noun of general reference, then it follows that virtually every noun in the English lexicon will have to be formally analyzed as [+masculine], and the few nouns that refer only to women, e.g., secretary, prostitute, aunt, nanny, dowager, mother, etc., will be the marked set, either [+feminine] or [-masculine]. Geoffrey Leech (1969) opted for the latter alternative, without, however, providing any empirical evidence for his decision to use [±Male] to mark gender distinction in English. My quarrel with Leech is not his analysis specifically, but his evidently blind and unquestioning acceptance of the primacy of "maleness" in English. The real problem surfaces in my examples (6), (9), (10), and (11). Ignoring, for our purposes, the paired male references in (6), we note that some nouns, including inanimate nouns, may apparently be replaced by she in usage, e.g., teacher, spider, America, and world. Unlike human nouns, where, for the most part, we have sex-marked pairs, e.g., spinster/bachelor, mother/father, aunt/uncle, daughter/son, waitress/waiter, widow/widower, these nouns do not have related male-specific nouns, even though we may find words that do parallel each other in usage, such as motherland and fatherland. And, to complicate our description further, what are we to make of the common use among linguists of mother tongue, daughter language, mother-adjunction, sister-adjunction, daughter-adjunction, in fact, the whole underlying matriarchal metaphor that links femaleness to language? One of the most popular methods of handling this apparent oddity in language was forthrightly stated by Uriel Weinreich (1971: 316-7) in his discussion of the problems with the semantic theory proposed by Katz and Fodor (1963).

> The only issue in KF on which the 'metatheoretical' distinction between syntactic and semantic markers has a substantive bearing is the problem of markers of both kinds which 'happen to' have the same names. It is proposed, for example, that baby be marked semantically as (Human), but grammatically as nonHuman (hence it is pronominalized by it), whereas ship is treated in the reverse way. The problem, however, has been solved in a purely grammatical way since antiquity in terms either of mixed genders or of double gender membership. Besides, it is unlikely that the marking of baby as (Human) would solve any semantic problems, since most things predicable of humans who are not babies could no more be predicated of babies than of animals (i.e. nonHumans): is The baby hates its relatives any less odd than The kitten hates its relatives? Most importantly, however, this solution fails to represent as a productive process the reference (especially by men) to lovingly handled objects by means of she. The patent fact is that any physical object can in English be referred to by she with a special semantic effect. [Single italics are mine, while double italics are those of Weinreich.]

The ancient tradition invoked by Weinreich is, of course, that of the Greek Grammarians and the latter-day prescriptive grammarians of the past three hundred years, who have explicitly equated sex with gender. It was the Sophist Protagoras who "discovered the three genders" (Poldauf, 1948: 45). When this discovery is translated into English centuries later, we find statements about "gender" in English like the following:

> The gender signifies the kind or sex.
> (Maittaire, 1712)

> Nouns have properly two GENDERS; the Masculine, to denote the male kind; and the Feminine, to denote the female.
> When there is no distinction of sex, a Noun is said to be of the NEUTER Gender.
> The feminine Gender is sometimes expressed by adding ess to the Masculine.
> (Harrison, 1777)

> Gender is the distinction of sex.
> (Murray, 1795)

What we see unfolding before us, over a period of several hundred years, is a classic case of confusing the name given to an object by male grammarians with the reality of the thing. The name has come to supersede the system of noun classification (whatever it might have been in the Indo-European languages)

and the name has been accepted as the reality. Once Protogoras "discovered" the sex-linked labels feminine, masculine, and neuter as a means of characterizing the noun-classification system of Greek, and once those labels were unquestioningly adopted for the other Indo-European languages, the equation of sex with gender became an inevitable consequence, and we may never be able to see clearly enough to discover the actual noun-classification system of IE. (For a discussion of the consequences of this naming for other IE languages, see Robbins, 1978). Finally, the acceptance of these sex-linked labels has necessitated the pseudo-distinction made by linguists between "natural" and "grammatical" gender.

Usage in English calls into question all of our inherited preconceptions about "gender" in English, "natural" or otherwise. Furthermore, usage makes suspect any so-called "formal" description that incorporates "gender" as part of its grammar, which is exactly what Chomsky did in Aspects of the Theory of Syntax (1965). I will grant from the outset that Chomsky hasn't regarded gender as a central concern of Standard Theory or any of the revisions of it that have appeared in recent years. There is no entry in the index of Aspects for gender, feminine, masculine, or neuter as terms of the grammar, as I have noted elsewhere (Stanley, 1976), nor does Chomsky explicitly refer to the distinction between "natural" and "grammatical" gender. Here I will simply list those features of Chomsky's discussion that are relevant to my own concerns: (1) Gender is discussed under "Inflectional processes" in Chapter Four; (2) Chomsky used German, specifically the noun Brüder, because "English is too poor in inflection to illustrate this difference [[between] the traditional method of paradigms and the descriptivist method of morphemic analysis]" (pp. 170-1); (3) Gender is defined as a "specified feature" that is "inherent" to Brüder and therefore part of its complex symbol, while number and case "are introduced by grammatical rules" (p. 171); (4) Because the 'item-and-arrangement' analysis of descriptive grammars is "too clumsy" for a grammar based on rewriting rules, Chomsky decided

instead that "the theory of syntactic features developed earlier can incorporate the traditional paradigmatic treatment directly" (pp. 172-3); (5) Having distinguished between those features of a formative that are "inherent" and those that are "added by transformation," Chomsky tentatively proposed that the description of a formative as "a pair of sets of features" be considered "as a linguistic universal" (p. 181). At no other point in Aspects is the question of gender broached, yet, if I understand Chomsky correctly, he is proposing that the description of a lexical formative in terms of two sets of features is a linguistic universal, part of the innate language-acquiring mechanism, and that the syntactic features are substantive universals (q. v. Chomsky, 1965: 27-30). With this consideration in mind, let us examine Chomsky's diagram of the hierarchical relationships among syntactic features.

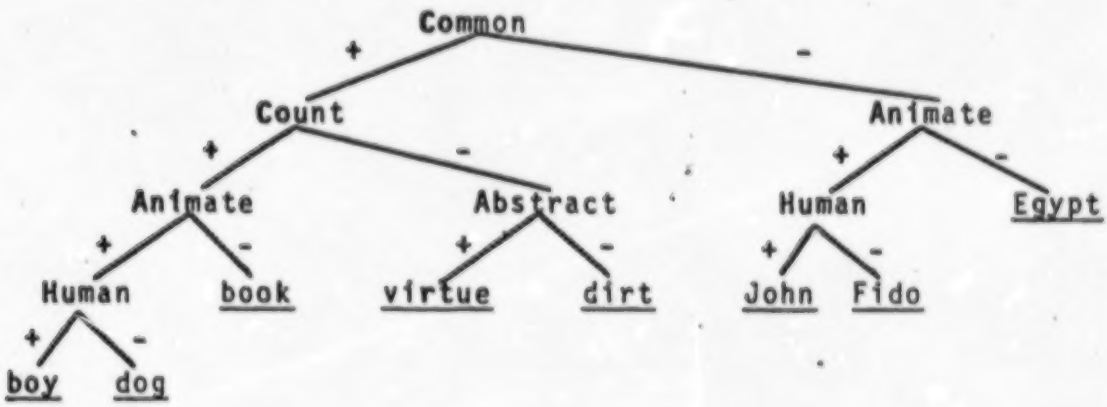

Figure 2. From Aspects of the Theory of Syntax, p. 83.

Now, as an aside, it may be one thing to remark that Chomsky's analysis of the noun virtue as [+Abstract], and therefore [-Count], is inaccurate, since virtue can be pluralized. This false description is undoubtedly a result of Chomsky's selection of an unfortunate example where honesty or some other word might have

seem a better choice (although sin, beauty, truth, and other "abstract" nouns can also be pluralized in English). I am not as concerned with what is in Chomsky's diagram as I am with what is not there, and that is his later addition of gender as a syntactic feature, specifically feminine, masculine, and neuter, since he incorporated the traditional paradigm! There are three problems introduced into the formal description that Chomsky has ignored: (1) There are three features, but only two labels for them in a binary system; (2) Sex, or gender, whichever one calls it, also refers to other animals, and the diagram will have to be revised; (3) Usage in English, the language that Chomsky found "too poor in inflection," contradicts this simplistic description.

These problems have been dealt with in various ways by linguists, but no one seems to have a solution that will satisfy both the realities of natural languages and the requirements of a formal grammar. For example, Jacobs and Rosenbaum (1968: 96-7), in an attempt to solve the first problem, resort to using the features [-feminine], [-masculine] for the English pronoun it. (For a more complete discussion of the problems with this solution see Stanley, 1978.) The problems with binary feature analysis become even clearer when one considers the relationship between the features [±Animate] and [±Human]. Mary Ritchie Key (1975: 19), in her discussion of this problem, offers the following diagrams as possibilities:

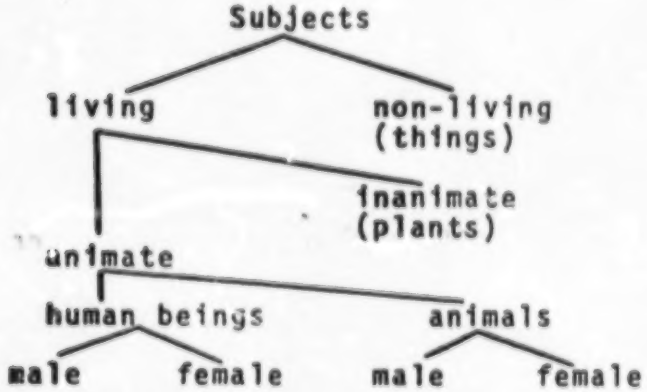

Figure 3.

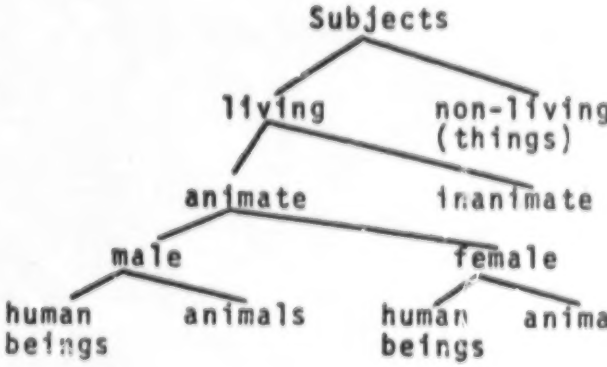

Figure 4.

As Key observes, there is no way to determine which is the most basic category. If one follows the assumptions of both Meyers (1974) and Leech (1969), Chomsky's binary diagram would have to be revised in the following way:

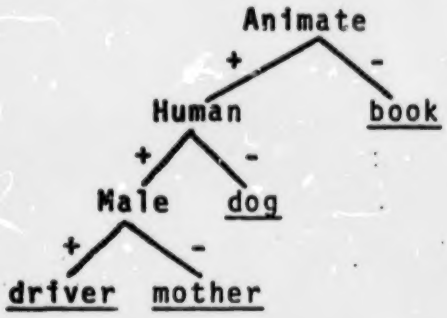

Figure 5. From Stanley, 1976.

But, of course, no linguist has yet taken such a proposal seriously, nor is any likely to. For one thing, the revision ignores the fact that we use sex-marked pronouns to refer to animals as well as humans. For another thing, usage contradicts such simplicity, however appealing it might be to linguists on other grounds. The fact of the matter is, as Weinreich's statement reveals, that any object "lovingly handled" by men can be referred to by she in English. In order, then, to preserve binary feature analysis, we will have to move the feature [±Male] upward so that it dominates the feature [±Animate].

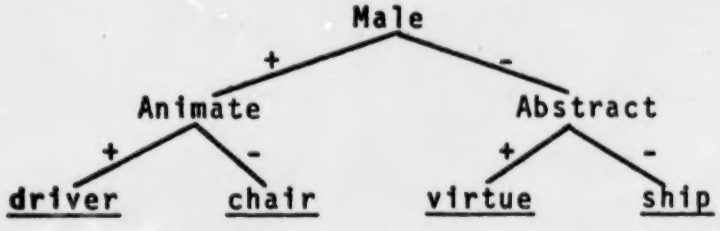

Figure 6.

Of course, this diagram isn't descriptively adequate either. For example, I should probably add [±Animate] under [-Abstract] in order to account for aunt, mother, and seamstress. However we may try to rescue binary feature analysis it is clear from the preceding pages that binary features cannot be used as the basis for defining a condition of coreferentiality. Without a precisely defined condition of coreferentiality, we cannot formulate a transformational rule that adequately describes (or explains) pronominal replacement in English. That is, there is no "condition of coreferentiality" that will account for how the pronoun she replaces the noun teacher or how he replaces the antecedent noun linguist. As long as our definition of coreferentiality depends upon binary features, our transformational rules for anaphoric relations won't work. Finally, Chomsky's description of syntactic features, based as it is on the pseudo-distinction between "natural" and "grammatical" gender, poses serious problems for his ideas about substantive and formal universals, at least in this area of his theory.

That masculinist bias in linguistic description has contributed to the present crisis in the discipline should be obvious at this point. What is perhaps less obvious is the way that bias has also focused our attention on nouns. That is, in the preceding pages, the linguistic analyses I've been citing all purport to describe "features of language," when, in fact, they deal only with the categorization of nouns. To maintain, as Chomsky and others do, that descriptions of nouns will serve to describe verbs is insufficient. In effect, the description of verb systems has been ignored, perhaps because it is useless to try to describe verbs with binary features. Whatever the sources of the silence, linguists continue to ignore verbs in their description, another bias inherited from the prescriptive grammarians, but one that goes back to the Greek philosophers. (An ancient history isn't always a respectable one.) Of the few linguists who have attempted descriptions of verbs, only Lakoff and Ross (1977: 160-1) have explicitly commented on the fact that there are certain "verbs that

require semantically female subjects (menstruate, pregnant), there are none in any language with gender distinctions that require grammatically feminine subjects." Although it's not clear from their discussion what conclusions we're to draw from this observation, this example may serve to demonstrate once again how masculinist bias has affected our understanding of language and how it works. In effect, they dismiss the problem of describing verbs by resorting to the fallacious distinction between "natural" and "grammatical" gender. This time, however, "natural" gender is evidently to be read as synonymous with "semantics." (For a more thorough discussion of verbs such as menstruate and castrate, see Stanley and Wolfe, forthcoming.)

At this point, it should be apparent that male domination of linguistic descriptions has seriously hampered our progress in understanding how natural languages function, and male linguists have often explicitly denied that there is any relationship between language structure and the culture in which a language is spoken. It should also be clear that any theoretical framework that attempts to "describe" language as separate from its cultural context runs the risk of becoming vacuous abstractions. Furthermore, a theory that claims the status of linguistic universals for certain of its postulates cannot afford the absurdity of ignoring linguistic data, however attractive the pursuit of universals may be to some. A model of language that consistently substitutes the assumptions of prescriptive grammarians for the data of language use, without seriously questioning those assumptions, cannot claim that its descriptions have an empirical basis or that its methodology meets its own criteria of descriptive and explanatory adequacy. Until certain linguists are willing to examine closely the sources of their "intuitions," our models of language will continue to reflect only the mirrored distortions introduced in the past.

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